

## **My experience as a youth in the agriculture sector**

Working with a Non-Governmental Organisation in the agriculture sector has given me a great feeling of fulfilment, seeing how I am directly contributing to the livelihoods of communities and the country's development. However, working on the grassroots, engaging directly with farmers in rural communities, in the sector also makes me feel sad and challenged comparing the current development status of the country with how it was supposed to be looking at the resources that it has and the development potential that the country holds. There are more opportunities in Malawi than the challenges we focus on.

I am engaged in the agriculture sector mainly in two ways; as a commercial farmer and as a young water professional. I was motivated to go into agriculture as a farmer looking at its potential in generating incomes and its significant contribution to wealth creation. As I was contemplating of joining the agricultural sector, whilst evaluating other investment options, I was fascinated by how prominent business people like Steve Masiwa and many other business tycoons in Malawi highly regard agriculture. Many high profile individuals in the country, including all the country's presidents, also engage in agriculture as a personal pursuit to financial freedom. This shows the potential that the sector has in creating wealth and improving micro and macro-economic environments.

In a greater way, I engage in agriculture as a water professional working to help smallholder farmers in rural parts of the country increase their production capacities and improve food security as well as their livelihoods. It is quite unjust that more people in the country live in dire poverty and several more go to bed hungry in this land of plenty, full of human and natural resources to take the country from its current state to a better one.

When it comes to the involvement of the youth in agriculture and other development works, there are two conflicting perspectives, which all hold some truth. The first one is where the youths see themselves as vulnerable, unsupported with so many barriers around them that they cannot contribute much to the country's development. At the same time, elders, and some youths of course, see the untapped and underutilized potential of the youths and their capacity to positively impact the country's development, primarily agriculture. In Malawi, the youth make more than 73% of its population, and if as youths we would feel responsible

and challenged that our parents and elders' food will be produced by us, we would make great strides towards food security. At the same time, empowering, supporting and involving this large youth population in policy processes, which is normally characterized by energy, creativity and zeal to build a great future, will help the country optimize the demographic dividend and accelerate its efforts towards achieving food security.

My experience engaging with fellow youths in entrepreneurial circles and in the agricultural sector has shown me that fewer youths are courageous enough to pioneer investments in agriculture and their value chains as they focus more on the challenges they are likely to face due to the country's business environment and economic situation. The ones that are daring to establish investments in agriculture, face several challenges including challenges in securing finances due to the higher risks associated with agriculture. Youths from rural communities are virtually disconnected and usually lack timely access to market information and complete information on modernized production and value addition technologies.

However, the better part of the story is that there are still some who carry on the entrepreneurial path and with patience and tenacity, they register successes. One of the youths who has been successful is **Clara Kamlomo**, a social entrepreneur who uses her horticultural skills to train farmers in rural areas on mushroom seed making and cultivation. She also extends the training to other interested individuals who are not able to participate in physical trainings through social media like the whatsapp platform. Through the trainings, she has reached 450 farmers who are now able to produce mushroom seed and cultivate mushrooms, providing their households with protein and mineral rich food. Some participants of the trainings have already scaled up production and are able to supply local markets. Apart from being able to produce mushroom for herself and for sale, Clara has been able to purchase 2.5 acres of land where she will integrate animal husbandry and horticultural production. She is already working on scaling up seed production and cultivation as well as using modern technologies to process and preserve the mushrooms.

Another success story is of **Victon**, a young man in his early twenties from one of the remote areas in Lilongwe, who upon receiving a training in modern and sustainable agricultural practices at Saint Paul's Agriculture Training Centre and support from technicians at the

school was able to produce high quality onions for the first time. From the marketing skills gained at the training centre, he managed to secure markets in the countries local markets and some chain stores and got his first One million kwacha. He has been able to increase his landholding and upscale production and he is a model amongst many youths within his community.

Some parts of the stories of these youths are quite common; they are all fruits of incubations, workshops and agricultural fairs. I have participated in several of these and my experience is that there is a great inspiration that results from these gatherings.

Despite the wide accepted potential that technological innovations have in transforming the links in the food value chains, very little and slow advancements are being made. Save for a few digital technologies, most technologies are used on advanced commercial farming systems. Development of new digital innovations in agriculture in Malawi is still staggering possibly due to poor collaboration between IT and agriculture experts. Malawi, through its universities and colleges, graduates a lot of youths having various skills in agriculture, information technology and other related disciplines. Having platforms that would integrate various skill sets would improve the situation.

Increased access to cellphones and smart phones has led to improvements in other activities like marketing produce, online trainings on various crop production practices. However, adoption and usage of most other digital innovations in smallholder farming systems are limited by financial constraints, limited network coverage, low computer literacy, limited access to regular internet services and inadequate communication and electricity infrastructure.

### **Major achievements and success stories**

In the agricultural sector, some of my main professional achievements include adding a valuable experience in commercial horticultural production as well as aquaculture farm development skills on top of my water resources engineering skills.

In my first job after college, at Saint Paul's Agriculture Training Centre, I also launched irrigated agriculture through my skills in irrigation investments planning, and irrigation and drainage systems design and installation and established the project's fish farm and led it into integrated agriculture. These enhanced the school's credibility in offering trainings in sustainable agriculture as prior to this, only theoretical trainings were offered.

On my role I have also significantly contributed to the improvement in the participation of communities in long and short trainings in agriculture and their value chains by using my community mobilization skills.

Being part of the team that trains farmers in entrepreneurial focused agricultural production, I have had my share in improving livelihoods of several farmers within the 27 farmers that participated in the 2017 training at Saint Paul's Agriculture Training Centre.

## **Questions I would ask the experts at the Rwanda Youth Conference on:**

- **Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship**

Most job openings in private companies and government departments require prior working experience in sectors relevant to the roles, usually to secure individuals competent enough to carry out the tasks required and reduce the probability of risks in investments that come due to incompetency, what strategies does FAO put in place to ensure a good balance between assured competency through some hands on work experience and ensuring employment opportunities for the youths?

What opportunities and platforms are there for young leaders leading startups and spearheading innovative projects to engage more youths and other stakeholders in agriculture, food security and nutrition? What support does FAO provide?

In most developed countries innovation hubs and incubators have proved very useful in promoting entrepreneurial development and innovation, what is FAO's perspective on this? If it supports the idea of incubators and innovation hubs, how would FAO support the establishment of these in the region?

- **Digital innovation to overcome agriculture value chain constraints**

New is not always better. How does FAO work on ensuring that the various innovations in agriculture do not end up being a dead-end to progress in the areas the innovations are designed to improve?

One of the constraints to progress in the agriculture sector usually is low adoption to various innovations that come, often due to low cost effectiveness, unwillingness to try out new technologies due to the risks associated and sometimes mere resistance to change. Since most digital innovations are considered costly and their operation complex how best can we ensure that smallholder farmers in the rural areas who produce most of our food have access and easily adopt these new technologies?

Seeing that food is mostly produced in remote areas with limited network coverage, poor computer literacy, and inadequate communication and electricity infrastructure, how does FAO intend to solve implementation challenges in such areas?

In most developing economies like Malawi's, careers in agriculture are opportunity driven and those youths who happen to get job opportunities usually hold on to their jobs for security although they are usually experienced, exposed and more connected than their counterparts who haven't been well engaged after their studies. What opportunities and support mechanisms are there for those youths with innovative solutions in engaging other youths to promote the development of agricultural digital innovations but are afraid to quit their jobs and pursue those dreams?

- **Future of work in rural economy**